

The University of Chicago

FACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT
OF THE STUDENT VOLUNTEER
MOVEMENT FOR FOREIGN
MISSIONS

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY
SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1941

By
WILLIAM M. BEAHM

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FACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE STUDENT VOLUNTEER MOVEMENT FOR FOREIGN MISSIONS

BY WILLIAM M. BEAHM

It is the purpose of this study to show that the rise of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions was a phenomenon based upon certain dominant religious and social forces of the late nineteenth century. These forces were given effective unity and expression by the leaders of the S. V. M. through their program and ideology. The program included the dissemination of missionary information among students, the securing of personal commitment to foreign missions as a life work, and the inducing of these "Student Volunteers" to take permanent service under the foreign mission boards and societies of the Protestant Churches. The Movement¹ provided a unifying and expansive objective in its watchword, "The Evangelization of the World in this Generation." From a position of early criticism and misgiving, this watchword came to be the tacit aim of the entire Protestant missionary enterprise. This great task was laid upon the students in schools of higher learning in the direct form of a personal challenge to sign the Movement's declaration card, "It is my purpose, if God permit, to become a foreign missionary." This signature was regarded in the highly religious terms of being the response to the call of God. Every student was expected to face this issue and respond to it positively, or else to be able to show that God had given a definite call elsewhere.

As a result of this program and these ideological emphases, the Movement enrolled, between 1886 and 1936, just under 50,000 Student Volunteers, of which number over 13,000 actually sailed to

1. The terms "S. V. M." or "Movement" will be used equivalently. The term "student Christian movement" will be used as a general name for all similar organizations taken as a whole.

the foreign fields of missionary service. These workers served either under the Church boards or under some form of interdenominational agency related to the churches. During this fifty year period approximately half of the missionaries sent out were Student Volunteers. The peak year was in 1908 when two thirds of the missionaries appointed were members of the Movement.

The Movement increased in influence until after the world war when it began a rapid decline. By 1940 it had almost ceased to be a decisive factor either in student religious life or in the promotion of the missionary program of the churches. It will appear from this study that this decline can be traced largely to the radical shift or decline of those religious and social forces upon which the Movement was originally based.

Several other studies have recently been made, which have dealt with those aspects of the Movement's history and development relating to the other parts of the student Christian movement.² As compared with them, the contribution of the present study lies in the following areas: It centers its concern not in the general student Christian movement—the early voluntary student religious societies, the student Y. M. C. A., the student Y. W. C. A., and related organizations—but in the specific movement and organization known as the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions.³ This Movement is dealt with in the light of an exhaustive examination of all the records available and brings it to the year 1940, when its almost complete decline can be regarded as the end of an era. The subject is treated not merely in terms of the historic sequence of events but also with an attempt to interpret the dynamic aspects of its development. This study deals with the S. V. M. not merely as an aspect of the general student Christian movement, but with special reference to the total missionary program of the churches. This missionary program is seen to have been a great prior movement whose expanding program and characteristic ideology were introduced into the nascent student Christian movement. This was true in many ways and was effected by various men. Its most char-

2. Clarence P. Shedd, *Two Centuries of Student Christian Movements*, Association Press, New York, 1934. This was originally the substance of a Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1932.

3. William H. Morgan, *Student Religion During Fifty Years*, Association Press, New York, 1935. This was originally the substance of a Ph.D. dissertation at Columbia University.

acteristic form was in the S. V. M., and the most specific agent was Robert P. Wilder, the founder of the S. V. M.

SIGNIFICANT CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The late nineteenth century was marked by many characteristics which favored the rise of the S. V. M. It was a period of expansion, particularly of the Protestant nations and under the dominance of Britain. There was increasing rapprochement between Britain and America which developed a sense of common destiny for the Anglo-Saxon peoples. This political expansion was correlated with rapid commercial expansion and facilitated by the development of a world-wide system of travel and communication. By the end of the century this expansion of the west was matched by a similar interest of the orient in the civilization of the west. While it would be unfair to say that nineteenth century missions were merely the religious phase of this political and economic expansion, yet this unifying of the world's political and economic structure greatly facilitated the expansion of Christianity during this period.

American life was marked by the closing of the frontier and the turning of interest toward the growing cities and the world horizon. The schools of the middle west in particular developed rapidly and this area changed from being an object of eastern missionary effort, to becoming a source of outgoing missionary interest. There was a great increase of wealth among American Protestants as the cities grew and the country was developed. This gave rise to many merchant princes who, as laymen, became increasingly prominent in the life of the churches.

Traditional revivalism showed new vitality and improved quality, as exemplified in the amazing career of Dwight L. Moody. Frontier excesses were replaced by a quieter and more widespread evangelism centering in the cities and enlisting the interest of many laymen whose religious activities found characteristic expression in the Young Men's Christian Association. Moody's work issued in a large influx of new members into the churches. But it went further and took the form of conferences for the deepening of the spiritual life. This latter movement emphasized the authority of the Scriptures, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the dedication of life to religious work.

THE MATURING OF THE FOREIGN MISSIONARY MOVEMENT

Foreign missions began in America twenty years later than in England. They were inaugurated here as the result of a band of students at Williams College who, led by Samuel J. Mills, founded in 1806-08 the student "Society of Brethren." This original "Haystack Band" dedicated their lives "to effect in the persons of its members a mission or missions to the heathen." As a result of their insistent desire to become foreign missionaries, there was organized in 1810 the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. This board was followed by the organization of others so that by 1888, fifty-eight American societies sent delegates to the Centenary Conference in London. A third of these boards or societies were women's organizations. The American Board itself increased in strength. Its income for 1811 was \$999.52 but by 1884 it had increased to \$588,353.51. By that time foreign missions could point to successful results in India, China, Africa, and the South Sea Islands. Moreover new openings were beckoning in new and inland areas and these were regarded as providential calls to missionary expansion. This led by 1885 to an ambitious and concerted plan to co-ordinate all Protestant missionary endeavor so as to proclaim the gospel message to every person in the whole world.⁴

THE EMERGENCE OF THE STUDENT CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT

It had been hoped that the "Haystack Band" would grow into an organized intercollegiate movement. It did flourish at Andover Seminary both as a "Society of Inquiry" and as a smaller society of men pledged to become missionaries. Similar societies did spring up in several schools but conditions were not yet ripe for an organized movement to develop. It was in 1877 that the growing Y. M. C. A. movement had taken sufficient hold of student life to organize its intercollegiate department. Luther D. Wishard became the first college secretary and was instrumental in developing a flourishing movement with strong emphasis on Bible study, evangelism, and missions. In close connection with this work the college department of the Y. W. C. A. was organized in 1886. A more specifically missionary emphasis characterized the American Inter-seminary Missionary Alliance which was organized in 1880 among the theological

4. *The Missionary Review*, September 1885, see pp. 369-370, "A Plan to Evangelize the World", by Arthur T. Pierson.

schools. Their annual conventions were strongly influential in crystallizing missionary thought and in laying the missionary obligation upon students. This Alliance was limited to graduate students but furnished leadership for the S. V. M. when the latter awakened the missionary interest of the undergraduate world. The S. V. M. was to become the missionary aspect of the general and nascent student Christian movement. To the general interest in evangelism, missions, Bible study, and consecration, the S. V. M. added its own peculiar emphases. This addition included the strong emphasis upon foreign as against home missions, the interpretation of consecration in terms of definite volunteering for foreign missions, and the formulation of a watchword which served as a unifying objective for the student movement and the church. This slogan was world wide in its scope but was so interpreted as to intensify the foreign missionary obligation.

THE MOUNT HERMON CONFERENCE OF 1886

Moody had begun to do work among students in connection with his other evangelistic campaigns. In Britain, especially at Oxford and Cambridge, he was instrumental in leading numbers of capable and favored students into definitely religious work. Seven of these from Cambridge were influenced by Hudson Taylor to go to China in 1885 under the China Inland Mission. This story of the "Cambridge Seven" was told in American colleges during the year 1885-86 by J. E. K. Studd. He was a brother of a leading member of the "Seven" and came to America as a guest of Mr. Moody. While Studd was here Moody met also with Luther Wishard and C. K. Ober of the intercollegiate department of the Y. M. C. A. Out of this meeting grew Moody's agreement to invite students from all the schools to attend a Summer Conference for Bible Study. It was to meet July 1-31, 1886 at Mount Hermon, Massachusetts, at Moody's school for boys, and under his leadership. It was attended by 251 delegates from eighty-eight schools in twenty-two states and Canada. Among these delegates was John R. Mott, a Cornell sophomore from Iowa, who had been led into a deep religious consecration the previous winter by Studd, and who was destined to become the outstanding leader of missionary interests both in the student movements and in the churches across the world. Another delegate was Robert P. Wilder, a Princeton senior, born in India of eager missionary parents, and now burning with zeal for the inauguration of a

movement which would lead a thousand students to become missionaries.

The program was somewhat informal but specifically interested in Bible study and such methods of Christian work as are adapted to college life. No definite place was given to any missionary presentation, although both Wishard and Ober were eager for the Y. M. C. A. to promote a flourishing missionary movement. It was Wilder who introduced the strong missionary note into the Conference which issued in one hundred volunteers.

Wilder's father, Royal Gould Wilder, had served for thirty years in India as a Congregational, then an independent, and finally as a Presbyterian, missionary. His career was ended there in 1875 when his precarious health and desire to educate his children led him to settle in Princeton, New Jersey. His enthusiastic missionary passion and his independent missionary views were given expression in *The Missionary Review*, which he founded in 1878 and edited until his death ten years later. He criticized the Boards for their inefficient administration and urged an immediate doubling of all missionary forces. It was in this journal that the plan was first discussed for the evangelization of the world in the current generation. The plan was urged by such ardent pre-millennialists as Arthur T. Pierson and Royal Wilder himself. Not only did Royal Wilder urge this duty upon the churches, but he was eager for a movement to emerge among students to furnish the personnel for this great task. He had been a member of the "Brethren" at Andover Seminary. And he had induced both Grace and Robert to become passionately eager to return to India as missionaries. When Robert and others from Princeton attended the Alliance convention at Hartford in 1883 they conceived the plan for organizing a pledged society in their school. In the Wilder home they met and formed the Princeton College Foreign Missionary Society whose members signed the covenant father Wilder helped them to formulate: "We, the undersigned, declare ourselves willing and desirous, God permitting, to go to the Unevangelized portions of the world." This Society was limited to such covenanted members and its sole emphasis was upon foreign missions. Wilder went from Princeton to Mount Hermon in 1886 with a number of these comrades and with a mandate from his sister to start a movement of 100 Volunteers. The whole Wilder family was intensely confident in the power of prayer and followed Robert's

work with earnestness. So when Robert went to Mount Hermon, he went with definite aims and resources for spreading the Princeton plan to other colleges and raising up an army of Volunteers who would help to fulfill his father's expectation for the speedy evangelization of the world.

Robert worked in informal ways at first. He made personal contacts and called informal prayer groups and urged delegates to sign the Princeton declaration. Later he arranged for missionary presentations to be made in open meetings which aroused intense interest. These were followed up by the work of the growing band of Volunteers until, on the last morning, they secured their hundredth member. The dominant impression left on the whole delegate body was that God had worked in their midst and had done far more in answer to prayer than any of them could have accomplished. Accordingly this first intercollegiate Bible study conference became famous for the emergence of this new missionary movement which was to stir the student and church life of Protestant Christendom.

THE MOVEMENT IN THE COLLEGES

It was immediately felt that the colleges should be challenged by the "Story of Mt. Hermon" as they had been earlier by the "Story of the Cambridge Seven." Wilder, Mott, and two others were chosen to spend the next year travelling in the colleges. A New York business man, who was present and felt this to be a work of God, promised the financial support. In the autumn of 1886 all but Wilder withdrew for various reasons. But he, in spite of his father's severe illness, agreed to go alone if necessary. He secured John Forman, also of Princeton and born of India missionary parents, to go with him. They visited 162 schools and secured over two thousand Volunteers. These two men were unprepossessing but they were genuinely religious and at Princeton in the Wilder home they had formulated many facts about missions and world conditions into an effective argument for their cause. In 1887-88 no one visited the schools but new names came in. In 1888-89 Wilder again visited the schools and in 1889-90 Robert Speer made the tour. Speer had been led to volunteer at Princeton when Wilder and Forman visited there. He had just now graduated with high honors. His eloquence and religious earnestness resulted in a total of 1100 new Volunteers in the 110 institutions he visited! By 1891, when the first Quadren-

nial Convention was held, there were 6200 names on the membership roll of the Movement.

THE ORGANIZATION AND PROGRAM OF THE S. V. M.

It was two years after the Movement had been flourishing in informal and personal ways, that it was organized. Due to tendencies toward independent and irresponsible development the leaders of the Y. M. C. A. and the leading Volunteers organized the S. V. M. in 1888. They formed an executive committee by securing representatives of the other student Christian organizations. John R. Mott, who was now coming into prominence in the Y. M. C. A. as an inter-collegiate secretary, became the chairman. He was a Volunteer but felt led to fulfill his purpose by giving the Y. M. C. A. a missionary aim. The Y. W. C. A. was represented by Nettie Dunn, a Volunteer from Michigan who had just become the first travelling secretary for the college work of the Y. W. C. A. Robert Wilder represented the Inter-seminary Alliance. Thus this new Movement was integrated with the other organizations which were flourishing on the campuses. It was conceived as the missionary department of the Christian Associations and the Volunteers on the local campuses were expected to be active in these Associations. The travelling secretaries were chosen each year from student Volunteers who were on their way to the mission field. An educational secretary was soon chosen—Harlan P. Beach of China—who inaugurated a stimulating and influential program of mission study. This program included the production of text books for voluntary study classes, the training of leaders for these classes, the enlargement of library literature on missions, and the enlistment and supervision of classes. In co-ordinating the work of travelling secretaries, the educational secretaries, and the individual Volunteers, Mott proved to be an indefatigable worker with the twin gifts of far vision and patient concern for details. Being employed by the Y. M. C. A. and also acting as chairman of the executive committee of the Movement (which position he held until 1920!) he was able to co-ordinate the various aspects of the total student Christian movement. Since his first love was the S. V. M. he was able to make its ideals and aims influential in this wider movement.

THE FIRST THREE QUADRENNIAL CONVENTIONS

After four and one half years of growth among students it was felt in 1891 that a convention should be held which would co-ordinate the work and interest of the Volunteers among themselves, and also which would relate them more effectively with the boards and societies of the churches. This Convention was the first of a series which made the Movement widely known on the campuses and throughout the country. On the campuses, the work of the Volunteers had been promoted through the Christian Associations, but this Convention was under the direct administration of the officers of the Movement and as such it grew to be the biggest event in the student world. Moreover the Movement's watchword, which was emblazoned across the Convention platform, came to be the united objective of the total student Christian movement. So these Conventions were to fill a large place in the life and development of the Movement. At this first one there were 680 delegates and leaders in attendance. By the time the third one was held, in Cleveland again, in 1898 the attendance had increased to 2221.

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE S. V. M.

The work of the S. V. M. was set within the religious orthodoxy of its time and drew strength from its emphasis upon the authority of the Scriptures, the power and importance of prayer, the deity and authority of Christ, the necessity of conversion for salvation, the consequent importance of evangelism, and the need for deeper consecration of wealth and life to Christian work. Beyond these emphases, the Movement laid great stress upon the much greater need and opportunity in the foreign field, and the need for each student to face this need and plan his life accordingly. Students were now supposed to give a reason why they were called to stay at home and to assume the great commission applied to foreign missions in particular. This pressure was laid on students in terms of the Movement's declaration card. And the fulfillment of this declaration of purpose to become a foreign missionary, if God permit, was regarded as a maximum and direct contribution to the Movement's great objective: The evangelization of the world in this generation.

This watchword grew out of an earlier background of pre-millennial expectation but after it was adopted by the Movement, it was expounded and promoted by Mott who gave it a comprehensive in-

terpretation as the permanent goal of the Christian forces in the world. By 1900-10 he had secured tacit acceptance of it as a working ideal, by the world-wide student Christian movement and by the co-operating forces of Christian missionary expansion. This watchword served to gather up into a specific slogan many of the basic trends and ideals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its emphasis upon evangelism was relevant to the whole movement of revivalism. It expressed the growing ambitions of the expanding missionary forces. The imperialism of Protestant nations found partial expression in this slogan of world conquest. While the watchword was first suggested by Pierson from a pre-millennialist point of view, it gave expression also to the growing belief in progress. The dominant mood of the S. V. M. was one of optimism, and it was felt that a new and successful era of progress among the nations was being ushered in by the evangelizing work of the church. The Movement assumed, and was able to lead others to assume, that foreign mission endeavor was the fulfillment of Christendom's destiny.

THE PERIOD OF EXPANDING ACHIEVEMENT: 1900-20

During the first two decades of the twentieth century the Movement continued to expand along the lines of the program and ideology which characterized it in the early formative period from 1886 to 1900. The general political and economic movements were likewise expansive in their outlook. Up to the time of the world war the mood of American life was hopeful. The forces which were beginning to create difficulties did not overtake the mission program until after the war was over. The Protestant societies sent out from America 480 new missionaries in 1903 but by 1920 this figure reached 1731—an all time peak. The fifteen leading Protestant societies spent in 1901 a total of \$5,300,100 for foreign missions, but in 1920 the total was \$29,671,076. This growth in scope was paralleled by a similar growth in unity and co-operation which reached definitive expression in the Edinburgh missionary conference of 1910. Moreover the Movement's leaders came to have a larger place in responsible missionary circles. For Mott was chairman of this 1910 conference and began his vigorous career as a worldwide missionary statesman. His leadership of the expanding missionary forces did not interfere with his continued leadership of the S. V. M. and vigorous promotion of the Y. M. C. A. program. Indeed he was able to

co-ordinate these various movements so that they all pointed in the direction of fulfilling the watchword of the Movement. During this period the missionary outlook unified both the work of the churches and the activities of the student Christian movement. Indeed, Mott had already established in 1895, the World's Student Christian Federation, which under his leadership in this period, unified student movements all over the world.

THE POST-WAR SLUMP

The years of the war drained much missionary interest into military and European channels. But right after the war there was a burst of expansive missionary zeal. For it was felt that the ideals of the war were in harmony with the optimistic missionary crusade of the S. V. M. The Convention held in Des Moines in 1920 marked the peak of the Movement's development. It was attended by 6890 people from 949 schools and was followed by a peak year of newly enrolled Volunteers—2783. The churches put on big drives for forward movement funds and laid out vast programs for Christian world expansion. But this high peak of expansion was soon followed by a period of confusion and decline in the whole missionary program of the churches and the missionary emphasis of the student world. The number of Volunteers enrolled dropped from 2783 in 1920 to 25 in 1938. The number of Volunteers who sailed dropped from 637 in 1921 to 38 in 1934. The number of missionaries who sailed dropped from 1731 in 1920 to 367 in 1932. The attendance at the Quadrennial Conventions dropped from the 1920 peak to 2260 from 402 schools in 1932. These latter figures rallied in 1936 but by 1940 the Convention held in Toronto was attended by 465 delegates from 170 schools.

These marks of the Movement's decline were paralleled by internal strain, confusion and change. Mott resigned as chairman of the executive committee and J. Ross Stevenson resigned as its vice chairman, soon after the Des Moines Convention. After their long period of continued leadership, there was frequent change in their offices. The same was true of the Movement's headquarters staff. Fennell P. Turner had served as General Secretary from 1897 to 1919. He was followed by Robert Wilder who served until 1927 who was in turn succeeded by Jesse R. Wilson who served until 1936. After that two men served in four years with periods of uncertain administra-

tion between them. This same rapid change marked the entire staff during this period. The whole administrative structure was changed several times and different relationships were worked out with other organizations for the former bases of co-ordination proved increasingly unsatisfactory. The same change appeared in the literature program. The Movement resumed publication of its own organ in 1920 which was changed in form and frequency several times before being merged again with the *Intercollegian* of the Y. M. C. A. The watchword dropped rapidly out of use and the declaration card was revised. The purpose and methods of the Quadrennial Conventions came in for radical criticism and revision for in these Conventions the S. V. M. had been the unifying center of the whole student Christian movement. And now the shifting interests of the Christian Associations no longer were served by the traditional program. The result was that a sense of separation developed between the S. V. M. and the Christian Associations just at the time that there was a strongly felt need for increased unity in the face of overwhelming world problems.

FACTORS IN THE MOVEMENT'S DECLINE

Many efforts were made at adjusting the Movement's program to the new conditions so as to recover its position. But the trend of decline continued steadily. Many reasons have been given for this. It is fairly clear that no one reason is an adequate explanation of it. Internally these years were marked by many changes of leadership. This broke the continuity of its life and also left the subtle impression that it was a sinking ship from which they were fleeing. There was increasing difficulty in financing its program which was closely related to the depression and to the loss of Mott's direct leadership. The program tended to be topheavy and the effort to make it democratic led to an increased separation of the Movement from the Christian Associations. Its emphasis upon foreign missions seemed to overlook glaring needs in America and so the Movement appeared to be a specialized affair rather than a comprehensive one. It had always been both a student movement and a missionary movement. When the interest of the students veered away from missions it left the Movement in a dilemma as to which interest to follow. At this critical juncture there was a great decline in missionary education. One reason for this was the assumption that discussion of

world problems by students was an improvement over the former type of informative procedure. The Conventions came to have this discussional character.

Other factors lay in the related organizations. The Christian Associations, which had cradled the Movement, had also changed to a leadership who were less personally connected with the Movement. Their emphasis shifted away from the Bible study, evangelism, life-work decision, and foreign mission obligation on which the S. V. M. had originally built. Instead, they now emphasized new issues such as race relations, economic injustice, and imperialism which appeared to be world wide rather than limited to the foreign field. These and other rival issues and movements deflected student loyalties away from the Movement. The mission program of the Protestant churches was also changing, leading to a great reduction in the number of outgoing missionaries. Since the Movement directed all its members to seek service under these churches, the Movement lost the immediate outlet for its Volunteers. The rise of indigenous leaders reduced the need for western personnel. And the rise of the social gospel blotted out the sharp distinction between Christian America and the "Unevangelized portions of the world."

These more immediate factors were also affected by more general ones. The World War was followed by a reaction of disillusionment which reduced interest in crusades. There was a widely heralded revolt of youth against an earlier generation just at the time when the Movement was obliged to transfer itself to a new generation. The rise of nationalism in the orient made the whole mission program less welcome there and made it necessary for westerners to be more deferent toward indigenous people.

The pressure of all forces showed up acutely in the confusion in its ideology and the decline in its relevance. These were apparently too great and too far reaching to permit the recovery of its early power. Orthodox Christian thought underwent change, especially in the educational world which was the province of the S. V. M. Revivalism had given way to basic uncertainty as to the validity of the Christian faith, especially of its claims to exclusive supremacy. Accordingly the watchword fell into disuse and the argument for foreign missions lost its force. No new conceptions appeared which served to unite the ideals and aspirations of the new generation. And this resulted in the almost complete disappearance of the declaration

card as the basis of membership. The newer emphasis upon a world wide Christian community for which we all are working does not yet appear to be specific enough in its life work challenge to carry on the Volunteer tradition.

The S. V. M. arose within a united and mission minded student Christian movement at a time when the mission program of the churches was expanding rapidly. This foreign mission emphasis was given expansive form in the Movement's watchword and served as a stirring objective for the students and the churches. This objective was presented to the students in the definite terms of a life work decision set in religious terms, but which decision led to a specific career. These factors have now changed so completely that the Movement can no longer fulfill its characteristic function. While its organization still continues and it may be able to find some useful function in the student Christian movement, it has almost ceased to be a decisive factor in the promotion of the missionary program of the churches. This program has changed and declined but is still flourishing, though its promotion is almost completely carried on by the churches themselves. It is conceivable that the S. V. M. may again grow into an important and effective movement, for some of its earlier functions still need to be fulfilled. Such another cycle of vigorous usefulness however would be another Movement.

